

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FOR WESTSLOPE CUTTHROAT TROUT RESTORATION IN PINTLER CREEK IN THE BIG HOLE RIVER DRAINAGE

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region Three, Bozeman
July, 18 2014**

Proposed Action

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposed to restore westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) to Pintler Creek upstream of Pintler Falls including Oreamnos Lake. Rainbow trout is the only fish species present in Pintler Creek upstream of the falls and in Oreamnos Lake. Rainbow trout would be removed using rotenone, and cutthroat trout would be restocked into the stream and lake. Nearly the entire proposed project is located within the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness Area. The preferred alternative was to use a helicopter to transport equipment and personnel to the project location including to Oreamnos Lake. A motorized boat was proposed for applying rotenone to the lake. Non-motorized equipment would be used to apply rotenone to the stream. However, upon further consultation with the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, it was determined that a modified version of Alternative 2 would be the selected alternative for project implementation because it would have fewer impacts to wilderness resources.

Alternative 2 is identical to the Preferred Alternative except that non-mechanized equipment would be used to transport equipment and personnel into the drainage and apply rotenone to Oreamnos Lake. The modification of this alternative includes the use of a motorized boat to apply rotenone to Oreamnos Lake. Rotenone would be neutralized at Pintler Falls using potassium permanganate preventing fish from being killed downstream of the proposed project area. Once rainbow trout are removed, non-hybridized WCT would be used to repopulate Pintler Creek upstream of the falls and Oreamnos Lake.

Montana Environmental Policy Act

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess significant potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on May 5, 2014.

Public comments on the proposed project were taken for 45 days (through June 19, 2014). The EA was mailed to 62 individuals and groups; legal notice was printed in the Montana Standard (Butte) newspaper. A draft EA was posted on the FWP webpage: <http://fwp.mt.gov/publicnotices/>. Three written comments were received during the

comment period. Verbal comments were taken during regular board meetings of the George Grant Chapter of Trout Unlimited and Skyline Sportsmen in Butte and are paraphrased below.

Comment 1. (Montana DEQ): *From the Department of Environmental Quality: the project will require a Water Quality Protection Bureau's Pesticide Permit.*

Response: FWP is the holder of a Montana DEQ General Permit for Pesticide Application which covers the use of piscicides in Deer Lodge and Beaverhead (among others) counties (License # MTG870000).

Comment 2. *Regarding Pintler Creek, it is always a good idea to remove stocked fish especially if they are non-native. The EA states it is unclear if WCT existed above the falls. Is it possible they could have inhabited those waters, in other words, could they have made it up there by themselves? If that is a possibility, then I would not hesitate to support this project. If it is highly unlikely they could have found their way up there, then I would support this project only if it is vital to the WCT restoration effort. If there are other places to introduce WCT, I think those places should be utilized first.*

Response: It is unclear if WCT were present upstream of Pintler Falls prior to the introduction of rainbow trout to the drainage. The fisheries information collected in 2009 suggests there is a mix of trout genetics in the stream. Some trout phenotypically appear to be predominantly rainbow trout (see photo 1 below), and others appear to be hybrids between rainbow and cutthroat trout (see photo 2 and 3). The presence of hybrid trout would suggest that WCT inhabited Pintler Creek upstream of the falls prior to rainbow trout introduction, but this could only be verified through genetic testing and no tissue samples were collected during surveys. Regardless, this restoration is vital to the WCT restoration effort. There are few streams that have natural fish barriers and a large amount of high quality habitat upstream. Fish barriers are expensive to construct and require periodic maintenance. If a suitable location existed in Pintler Creek, to construct a fish barrier in Pintler Creek would likely cost in excess of \$200,000. Further, there are no opportunities outside the Anaconda Wilderness where there is the quantity of high quality habitat (12 miles) upstream of a natural fish barrier. FWP is actively performing WCT restoration projects outside of the Anaconda Pintler Wilderness Area, but none to date have been in a drainage containing more stream miles than Pintler Creek which is why it is critical to the WCT restoration effort.



Photo 1. Trout captured in Pintler Meadows upstream of Pintler Falls that has the appearance of a rainbow trout.



Photo 2. Trout captured from Pintler Creek upstream of Pintler Falls that have the appearance of hybridized trout (rainbow and westslope cutthroat trout).

Comment 3. *We the Anaconda Sportsmens Club is not necessarily in-favor of this, but not totally opposed to it. For one the use of poison to kill the Rainbows which have been reproducing. Knowing that FWP is strap for funds. Could this be just another novelty? We invite you to discuss this at any of our meetings which will-start again in September and they are slated for 3rd Wednesday of the month.*

Response: Funding for this project has been provided primarily by the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. FWP has contributed approximately \$2,000 toward the project. Native fish conservation, including WCT conservation, is a priority for FWP. Restoring native species and preventing them from being listed under the Endangered Species Act will ensure the species long-term survival and prevent additional federal regulations on species and habitat management (Note, a similar concern was raised at the Skyline Sportsmen's Meeting). FWP has agreed to meet with the Anaconda Sportmen's Club to discuss this project at their next board meeting in September.

Comment 4: Paraphrased from Skyline Sportsmen meeting: *When will cutthroat restoration end?*

Response: The WCT conservation goal for the upper Missouri River Basin is to have 20% of historically occupied habitat contain secured populations of WCT. In the Big Hole River drainage, there were historically approximately 1,200 miles of occupied streams and therefore the conservation goal for WCT in the Big Hole is approximately 240 miles of stream. Currently, WCT occupy approximately 6% of their historic range in the Big Hole. With the completion of the Pintler Creek project, the total number of stream miles restored in the past 4 years will exceed 50 in the Big Hole and when combined with existing secure populations in the drainage the Big Hole will be close to 50% of its conservation goal.

Comment 4: Paraphrased from Skyline Sportsmen meeting: *Cutthroat trout were never above the falls and they should not be put there.*

There is evidence that WCT were present in Pintler Creek upstream of the falls. The presence of fish that appear to be hybrids between rainbow and WCT would suggest that WCT were present in Pintler Creek upstream of the falls prior to rainbow trout introduction.

Comment 5. Paraphrased from a conversation with the Forest Service grazing lease holder for Pintler Meadows: *I am not in favor of the project because of the potential for additional regulations on grazing that accompany streams with cutthroat.*

The Forest Service is currently performing the Environmental Analysis and renewal of the grazing plan for the area that includes Pintler Meadows. This review did not include the potential for WCT to be restored to Pintler Creek. Any grazing changes suggested in and/or eventually implemented by the new plan are related to meeting Forest Service grazing standards, not the presence or absence of WCT. There are no proposed changes to grazing in the pasture including Pintler Meadows as a result of this project. Further, grazing related impacts to Pintler Creek have not been identified as a significant contributor to native fish decline in the drainage. The cause for native fish decline has

been the introduction of non-native rainbow trout which are proposed for removal through this project. Thus, the primary threat to native species in the drainage will be addressed through the proposed project.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment, further consultation with the Forest Service and the public comments received, and benefits and risks associated with this project, it is my decision to go forward with a modified version of Alternative 2 which includes restoring WCT to Pintler Creek, using traditional means (horses and by foot) to access the drainage and using a motorized boat to apply rotenone to Oreamnos Lake. I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. J. Flowers', with a large, sweeping loop at the end.

Patrick J. Flowers
Region Three Supervisor
